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ABSTRACT

The context in which career decisions are made is dynamic--occupations are changing rapidly and society is becoming increasingly complex. This digest describes a model that uses five processes which are critical to effective career planning: initiation, exploration, decision making, preparation, and implementation. The first process, initiation, addresses three core issues: (1) establishing an effective counseling relationship; (2) determining current motivation for career planning; and (3) building relevance for career planning. Attending to these issues should increase client awareness of the career planning process. Exploration helps clients discover ways to implement aspects of their vision while also attending to issues of meaning and personal context. Decision making, on the other hand, has one dominant issue: How to select the most appropriate option from the range of available alternatives. Uncertainty is a major obstacle to career planning and clients must learn to trust their intuition to guide them. Preparation focuses on planning the specific steps required to implement the choices made earlier and requires developing an action plan and prerequisite skills and resources. Finally, implementation entails the client carrying out the action plan. Groups that have used this model report a new-found focus as they considered career moves. (RJM)

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by Kris Magnusson

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Five Processes of Career Planning

Kris Magnusson

Overview

The context in which career decisions are commonly made is dynamic: occupations are changing rapidly, society is becoming increasingly complex and multicultural, and individuals need to plan for diverging rather than converging career paths. Furthermore, in times of social change and economic uncertainty, clients often feel discouraged, despondent, and hopeless about their futures. The encreasing complexity of client needs and career counseling interventions have rendered inadquate, and simplistic approaches to resolving career issues. Although traditional approaches still may play a role in career planning, additional emphasis must be placed on other issues: how self-concept is implemented (Super, 1990), personal adaptability (Super, 1985), and personal meaning-making (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990). Career counseling should also help clients achieve independence rather than dependence. Such factors necessitate a different vision of the counseling process.

The Five Processes

The model in this paper describes five processes critical to effective career planning: initiation, exploration, decision-making, preparation, and implementation (Magnusson, 1991, 1992). The processes are cyclical, although a few clients may begin at initiation and proceed sequentially through to implementation.

Initiation

Initiation means to set in motion. Clients become discouraged or lose hope and strategies to secure meaningful engagement are necessary. The initiation process addresses three core issues:

1. **Establishing an effective counseling relationship.** Traditional approaches to career counseling often overlook the importance of the therapeutic relationship. However, the establishment of a strong therapeutic alliance can be invaluable in motivating clients to take action.

2. **Determining current motivation for career planning.** This involves a detailed examination of presenting issues, with a particular emphasis on identifying client motivation for change and the context in which that change must occur. With this information, counselors can determine if clients are ready for specific career planning activities or if other interventions are needed.

3. **Building relevance for career planning.** Many clients who enter career counseling are discouraged and see themselves with limited opportunities. Counselors must encourage these clients and foster hope. Typically this is done by identifying issues of meaning for the client and by promoting a sense of the future.

To illustrate, clients may be asked to complete a "significant experiences" exercise, in which they write a two to three page narrative describing some accomplishment or experience of which they are proud. Client and counselor work together to identify the skills and characteristics that were demonstrated and then clients are asked to select the 5-10 most meaningful of these. Posing a simple question such as "How would you like to experience that level of pride again?" invariably increases client motivation for career planning. Attending to the core initiation issues increases client awareness of the career planning process, builds trust in the counselor, and renews hope by helping clients build a vision of the future.

Exploration

Exploration helps clients discover ways to implement aspects of their vision while concomitantly attending to issues of meaning and personal context. This is most effectively done by capitalizing on the renewed sense of energy and hope that arises during initiation. While formal assessment and occupational information sources may be useful, informal strategies tend to produce more meaningful, more accurate, and more enduring results. These include information interviewing, relational networking, job shadowing, and work experience.

For example, clients who have completed the significant experiences exercise described above will have a ranked list of skills and characteristics that were associated with a meaningful experience. Clients can be taught basic networking techniques to identify other people who share a similar passion. An interesting outcome of informal networking is that the occupational titles of the contacts are often surprising to clients—they never associated the occupation or setting with their own attributes. In this way, new vistas may be opened to clients as intriguing options spawn further exploration. Opportunities to experience the passion, through job shadowing or work experience, serve to validate initial impressions. Thus, initiation determines *what* is meaningful to clients, while

exploration determines *how* that meaning may be expressed.

Decision-making

Decision-making has one dominant issue: How to select the most appropriate option from the range of alternatives discovered to date. Formal decision-making models and strategies may be useful; however, these strategies by themselves rarely leave clients with a good feeling for the decision. Most clients are more comfortable with decisions which "emerge" as a result of engagement in the career planning process. When initiation and exploration have been thorough, a "right choice" crystallizes for most clients. Formal strategies may then be used to *confirm* a choice, rather than *determine* a choice.

Uncertainty is a major obstacle to career planning. Most clients need to recognize that a certain amount of ambiguity is associated with any decision. At this stage in the planning process, clients need to rely on their intuition to guide them to tentative choices. This may be encouraged by exploring how clients feel about alternatives they have encountered during exploration, and by using "what if" scenarios to prevent perceived barriers from prematurely ruling out options (e.g., "What if it was possible to...?"). The emotional response to an option may then be used as the catalyst for cognitive appraisal (e.g., a consequences matrix) and specific preparation.

Preparation

Preparation focuses on planning the specific steps required to implement the choices made earlier (including the choice to engage in further exploration). Preparation results in a detailed, concrete plan for goal attainment and involves two key issues:

1. **Developing an action plan** which may include contracts between client and counselor that specify the next set of steps that will be taken by the client, and how those steps will be evaluated and reported; and time lines, or graphic action plans. A horizontal line is drawn across a page, with the word "Now" at the extreme left and the client's goal statement at the extreme right. Each major step required to achieve the goal is listed on the time line, with spacing proportionate to the estimated time needed. An opportunity web transforms the time line into a branching career path. For each major step, at least one alternative step is identified and plotted on the page as an intersecting line that produces a different path. The alternatives are identified by asking "What if for some reason you were unable to complete Step X - then what would you do?" Clients learn to prepare for uncertainty by thinking ahead and having a back-up plan ready.

2. Developing prerequisite skills and resources for implementation. These may include: occupational (e.g., job searches); educational (e.g., study skills, applying for admission to educational institutions); personal (e.g., anger management, substance abuse).

The means for developing prerequisite skills must be included in the overall action plan. Clients should also identify the resources available and the resources needed for implementation (e.g., obtaining funding for education).

Implementation

In implementation, the client carries out the action plan. Two strategies govern implementation:

1. Developing support. Many decisions reached in the safety of the counselor's office are never implemented because of lack of support in the client's environment. Clients must learn both how to identify allies (as well as enemies) and how to nurture facilitative relationships.

2. Developing systems for feedback and reward. Clients also need to develop ways to monitor and reward their progress.

Merging the social support and feedback functions helps clients develop independence from counselors.

Summary and Conclusion

The five processes model has been used with a variety of groups (e.g., Native Canadians in northern communities, street kids in urban settings, inmates of correctional facilities, youth in schools, adults in transition). These groups often reported disenchantment and disillusionment with available career planning services. However, the initiation exercises excited them, increasing their hope and nurturing their dreams. This excitement led to vigorous and thorough exploration--even the most reticent clients were captivated by processes which allowed them to explore their passions in meaningful ways. Having found a focus for their passion, they were more committed to planning ways to realize their dreams and were more likely to follow through with their plans. Because they understood each process as it developed, they became less reliant on formal counseling. The seeds of self-sufficiency and adaptability were planted.

The dynamic nature of the occupational scene demands a dynamic system for career planning interventions; one that attends to issues of client uniqueness and personal meaning. By focusing on the critical career planning processes, counselors allow themselves the flexibility to attend to unique client needs.

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